



WHEATBELT ORGANISATION FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Existing Supports for Wheatbelt Child Care Centre Volunteer Management Committees

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Developed in partnership with:



RUCSN

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"Achieving Access, Equity and Sustainability for Children's Services in the Wheatbelt"

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Existing Supports for Wheatbelt Child Care Centre Volunteer Management Committees

The Wheatbelt Organisation for Children's Services [WOCS], in partnership with the Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs [RUCSN], has undertaken a project funded by Lotterywest. The broad objectives of the project include identifying and trialling potential supports for Volunteer Management Committees to increase capacity building in the community ensuring the sustainability of the child care service and contributing to the sustainability of the community.

The first stage of the project has been to liaise with services and determine the range of barriers and issues encountered in operating a child care service and identify existing supports for management committees and services. This has been undertaken in order to investigate the potential to implement successful models of support utilised by existing services to child care services in other Wheatbelt communities. The outcome will be to assist management committees and services to confidently offer a high quality service, and to ensure volunteers are more confident in taking on management roles in child care services due to the practical resources available to support them in these roles.

Background

In the Wheatbelt there are four privately operated centres, eight federally funded long day care centres, five state contracted occasional care centres and family day care. Currently an additional two occasional care centres and one long day care centre have been approved and should be operating in the near future. In April 2008 one of the federally funded long day care centres temporarily suspended the service's license. One federal occasional care service also operates - this service model is currently not available.

Volunteer Management Committees

The level of responsibility placed on volunteer management committees can be described as onerous. Volunteers are often employed, have their own family commitments and also volunteer for other community organisations. Volunteer committee members are responsible for a range of operations including

- Staff recruitment and management - including a knowledge of awards, payroll and employer obligations.
- Administrative functions including policies and procedures, reports, enrolments, newsletters and financial management.
- Meeting funding and licensing requirements.
- Ensuring maintenance of building and equipment.
- Sourcing funding and completing funding applications.

In addition to these responsibilities volunteers often have to undertake fund raising to ensure the financial sustainability of the service.

Barriers and Issues

Liaison with the community run child care services in the Wheatbelt was undertaken to identify the barriers and issues encountered by volunteer management committees in establishing and running a child care service. The results are summarised in table 1.

Table 1: Barriers & Issues Encountered in Establishing and Running a Child Care Services

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Limited or no knowledge of awards and employer obligations (eg employee contracts) and staff management.▪ Limited knowledge and experience in dealing with regulations, financials and policy development. This burden also deters potential volunteers.▪ Demands of volunteering role - Fitting volunteering in around work, family and other commitments.▪ Volunteer burnout – and consequent impacts on recruiting new volunteers – workload is too onerous.▪ Lack of support for volunteers – feeling isolated and having to cope with issues unsupported.▪ Knowledge of what other centres are doing – Are we doing it right? Is there an easier way? Are we the only centre dealing with these issues?▪ Recruiting and retaining staff.▪ Lack of suitable premises or funding to get premises up to regulation standard.▪ Lack of funding and access to Child Care Benefit to increase enrolments.▪ Fundraising – time and effort required to ensure financial sustainability due to lack of funding and in some cases lack of access to Child Care Benefit.▪ Length of the process involved in establishing service and delays in receiving funding (often quotes are no longer valid or prices have increased).▪ Processes need streamlining for establishing and running centres. |
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The issues and barriers outlined in table 1 are consistent with issues raised at the Kulin Forum and Toodyay Conference hosted by WOCS. In addition these issues were also identified in the publication “An Outline of Children's Services throughout the Wheatbelt” produced by WOCS and updated in 2006. This document included profiles of the child care services in the Wheatbelt.

Existing Supports

Liaison with child care services' volunteer management committee members identified supports and partnerships that increased the sustainability of their services and reduced the pressures on the volunteer committee members.

Existing supports include

- Local Government
- Children's Services Officer
- Professional Support Coordinator – RUCSN Resource Centre
- Wheatbelt Organisation for Children's Services
- Community Partnerships
- Other child care centres

Local Government

Whilst child care is not the responsibility of local government it often falls to the Local Government to provide support to community based child care centres in order to ensure provision of a service for residents. The range and extent of support varies as outlined in table 2.

Table 2: Local Government Support to Community Child Care Services

Type of Support	No of Services Receiving Support
Premises at nominal or zero rent	13
Maintenance of Premises	10
Cash Contribution	1
Administration Support	4
Council run service	1
Council run service with delegated authority for Management Committee	2
Other	2

Children's Services Officer [CSO] – Department for Communities

Many services praised the efforts of the CSO, however they felt that one officer was only able to provide a limited amount of support. The CSO is responsible for

- Providing information, expertise and support to assist children's services to attain and maintain the Child Care Services (Child Care) Regulations 2006, the Child Care Services (Outside School Hours Care) Regulations 2006, the Child Care Services (Family Day Care) Regulations 2006 and Child Care Services (Outside School Hours Family Day Care) Regulations 2006.
- Working with parents, communities, service providers, government and business to plan, establish and manage children's services consistent with the principles of engagement, collaboration, inclusiveness and capacity building and in the best interests of children.
- Providing information and support to parents to assist them select and access children's and early years services that best meet their needs and the needs of their children.
- Managing, monitoring and reviewing the funding agreements of agencies and children services funded by the department.

With the range of responsibilities it is a challenge to support the child care services in the entire Wheatbelt.

Professional Support Coordinator (PSCWA) – RUCSN Resource Centre

Child care centres have cited PSCWA – RUCSN as offering excellent resources and being a source of support especially in regard to the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System. Community managed child care services in the Wheatbelt experience some difficulties in accessing the services offered. The barriers to access include,

- PSCWA is funded to provide a limited amount of support.
- Distance – PSCWA is located in the metropolitan area. As such support is generally via phone or email. Face to face assistance is not always possible although this would be the preferred contact for volunteer management committees.
- Membership is required to access resource centre – the limited funding and attendances, due to the low population of many Wheatbelt towns, result in smaller services operating on extremely limited budgets. This membership is another cost for services.
- Cost of attending training workshops. Whilst PSCWA runs training in the Wheatbelt, workshops are often held in regional centres consequently resulting in both time and travel for staff or committee members to attend. In addition, to accommodate the staffing requirements of the services training is held in the early evenings or on weekends impacting on personal / family time.
- Access to support services is not available to state contracted occasional care services.

PSCWA is funded to provide a support to federally funded child care services which excludes state contracted occasional care. PSCWA does not exclude occasional care services from attending training, however if there are limited places long day care services would get priority. Additionally general support services are not available to state occasional care.

Wheatbelt Organisation for Children's Services [WOCS]

Services indicated WOCS to be a supportive organisation that represents the needs of Wheatbelt child care services in a proactive manner. Forums and conferences run by WOCS have provided services with the opportunity to network, access staff from state and federal government departments and express their issues on a political level. WOCS has also represented rural services on the Child Care Regulations Review Committee and on the Ministerial Child Care Advisory Committee.

WOCS has provided information to services via email and newsletters. Following the appointment of a project officer direct support / contact has been available to services. Some basic supports have also been implemented including a contact list, expansion of the WOCS newsletter to incorporate a focus on services, a brief regarding Validator Visits and colation of software used by Wheatbelt services for the Child Care Management System to assist services in choosing software and for support.

Community Partnerships – Support

A range of innovative partnerships and supports have been implemented by individual child care services. Table 3 outlines the nature of these partnerships and details examples.

Table 3: Community Partnerships and Supports

Form of Partnership or Support	Details
<u>Sharing premises:</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ CWA ▪ Playgroup ▪ Toy Library
<u>Community Relationships</u> General partnerships:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School ▪ Library – story time ▪ Turn the page – rotating story time partnership with other services ▪ Reciprocal membership with existing organisations to share resources/premises etc

Table 3: Community Partnerships and Supports

Form of Partnership or Support	Details
Professional development:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Utilising local skills / professionals to provide training for child care service staff – for example hospital on hand washing.
Loans for capital expansion:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In partnership with shire ▪ Interest free from local business
<u>Sponsorship & Donations</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Western power – local branch ▪ Order of Old Bastards ▪ Rainmakers Ball ▪ Local businesses
<u>Fundraising</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Funds raised through community support to build a centre ▪ Fundraising through sponsored events – for example bike ride
<u>Organisational Structure</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An existing organisation establishing the service – for example a Telecentre ▪ Operating as a committee of council under a local government
<u>Other</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Accessing programs such as prison volunteer scheme to do maintenance or other non contact services. ▪ Networking with other child care services

Discussion

The barriers and issues encountered by volunteer management committees in operating child care services are primarily funding, support for volunteers, lack of knowledge / training and feeling isolated. Another critical issue is volunteer burnout and the volunteer time required to operate the service.

The main form of support for Wheatbelt child care services is local government. The range and extent of support varies between local government authorities. Child care is not the responsibility of local government however providing child care can have a positive impact on the local community. The availability of child care can influence professionals, such as police officers and teachers, in their choice of work location, can attract families to the community, and in itself expands the range of employment available in addition to increasing the labour available to join the local workforce. Child care can also enable families to participate in the community through attending events, participating in busy bees and community organisations and build community capacity through enabling parents to attend workshops, training or to undertake further education.

The Wheatbelt CSO is also a major form of support to child care services. Unfortunately the area encompassed by the Wheatbelt in addition to the range of responsibilities and duties are such that the role is limited in its capacity to meet the support needs of the services. The services spoke very highly of the quality of the support they have received from the CSO.

Services also considered the RUCSN Resource Centre to be a valuable support and long day care services found PSCWA to be supportive. Concerns primarily focussed on the travel and time required to attend training and the availability of relief staff.

WOCS has implemented several basic supports such as a child care service contact list which includes committee representatives, expansion of the WOCS newsletter to include a focus on services and collating information to distribute to services. The primary focus of these supports has been to increase networking between services and to encourage the formation of a network to offset feelings of isolation. In addition articles in the newsletter also revolve around sharing information and raising awareness of what other centres are doing. The WOCS website has links to organisations / government departments involved in child care as well as links to organisations that may assist volunteer management committees.

Community partnerships and local supports are essential to the ongoing sustainability of Wheatbelt child care services. Unfortunately being in a primarily agricultural area supports, especially local sponsorship or donations, can fluctuate with seasonal conditions. Partnerships formed such as shared premises can reduce the cost of overheads for each organisation, increase the volunteers to undertake minor maintenance and busy bees and involve the use of shared resources – kitchen utensils, play equipment etc – reducing outlays on these items. Accessing professional development through accessing local skills / professionals is cost effective (nil or nominal charges) and may be more relevant to the local service. Establishing the service under an existing organisation can reduce outlay on insurance, equipment and result in increased volunteer participation for both the existing organisation and the child care service.

Conclusion / Recommendations

The obvious solution to support child care services would be an increase in government funding and access to child care benefits for all services. Whilst this would potentially increase the financial viability of the services, increased funding would not guarantee availability of relief staff to enable services to attend training, would not increase knowledge or capacity of the volunteer management committees nor reduce feelings of isolation. This would however reduce volunteer time through eliminating the need to fundraise and potentially employ a paid administrator.

Local government is in a prime position to support child care services however this would result in an additional financial burden on ratepayers. The provision of administrative support would substantially ease the burden on volunteers. In 2006 WOCS worked with NEWOC and submitted an application to Wilson Tuckey MP proposing that "re-occurring funding be provided by the Federal Government to Local Authorities in the Wheatbelt area of Western Australia for the purpose of administrative support to assist Volunteer Child Care Committees". There has been no response to this submission to date.

The CSO role is highly valued. To offset the responsibilities and the distance to be covered in the Wheatbelt the role could be expanded and separated into two components. Potentially one component would involve administrative functions and the second would be a support role for child care services. The two roles would liaise quite closely. Whilst this would be ideal this would involve an increase in staffing for the department and consequent increase in expenditure.

Expansion of the role of PSCWA to include state funded occasional care services is another option. This could also include access to the RUCSN Resource Centre. PSCWA currently offers support and training to long day care and family day care services in the Wheatbelt. As such PSCWA infrastructure is already in place and this would simply involve expanding the current support. Ideally an increase in funding to offset travel costs to enable more local support in the Wheatbelt would provide increased access to support and training for services.

The previous recommendations require increased funding of some form. As such the likelihood of these supports being implemented in the near future is unlikely.

Currently the main existing forms of support that could potentially be implemented by child care services in the Wheatbelt include,

Forming community partnerships in the form of shared premises, access to local training, local sponsorship and in kind support from local government. These supports have minimal costs for the child care services and also have the potential to reduce overheads and outlays on resources and equipment.

Similar benefits can be gained by establishing services under an existing organisation, however for established child care services this would involve changes with licensing.

Some of the issues faced by Wheatbelt child care services, such as availability of qualified staff, are also experienced by metropolitan services. However these issues are exacerbated in rural towns. The low populations in small Wheatbelt towns result in a very limited pool of potential staff. Additionally, the perceived isolation of the communities is a deterrent to potential recruits from metropolitan areas. The part time operational hours of small services result in part time staff positions a further deterrent to attracting staff. The buildings and environment in which Wheatbelt childcare services operate are very different to their metropolitan counterparts. Many services locate in existing buildings, disused pre primary centres, CWA halls and even converted residential houses. Smaller centres also run multi age group settings to accommodate both staff ratios and building types.

Many support services, government departments are based in the metropolitan area and do not have an understanding of the issues faced by Wheatbelt child care services or the environments in which they operate. Accordingly other child care services operating in the Wheatbelt have a more comprehensive understanding of both the issues and barriers being addressed by services and the environments in which they are operating. There are a number of experienced coordinators and committee members throughout the Wheatbelt child care sector. Sharing information and working together to overcome or address barriers is a cost effective and outcome focussed support. As previously mentioned WOCS is currently implementing basic supports to encourage and develop networking and sharing of information between services in the Wheatbelt.

The issues surrounding lack of knowledge and experience in administration and management of services also require addressing. Networking and sharing information can assist in this area, however access to resources and training are essential. WOCS is currently developing a resource manual which may assist in overcoming these issues. Not for profit incorporated organisations hold an annual general meeting at which office bearers are elected resulting in the possibility of committee members changing every year. Accordingly supports and training have to ensure they are either run annually or be of a form that can be passed on to new committee members.

Investigation of the viability of other forms of training and resources for committee members, such as DVDs or on line training, is also warranted.